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CHARACTER OF THE FEMININE IN LÉVINAS AND THE *DAODEJING*《道德经》

Introduction

I shall start this article with a prominent issue contemporary feminists seem to be faced with: Would the writings stressing the specificities of woman reinscribe traditional dichotomy between woman and man? Would feminist claims to women's equal rights end up with advocating gynocentrism in place of androcentrism? Traditional feminine–masculine dichotomy has been commonly related to paternal hierarchy, but now the reinscription of this dichotomy is associated to what is called gynocentric feminism or matriarchal dominance. From this standpoint, feminist claims to equal rights are seen to entail a reversion of women and men's status without a substantial change of the hierarchical social structure. Another version of criticism is suggested in the comment that Western feminism has been moving in the direction of promoting female to the status of an honorary male, which may cause gender sameness. In this light, gynocentrism would be little more than an alias of androcentrism, which, paradoxically, implies the final surrender of women to men.

All these comments and criticisms reveal the predicament of Western feminism today. In my view, the skepticism that feminist theorization and practice would not necessarily lead to a real demise of women's subordination derives from a misunderstanding of the feminist movement, and more primarily, from a misunderstanding of how the difference of woman from man should be conceived. This predicament constitutes the background against which some Chinese philosophers working in the West argue that it is both naïve and ethnocentric to suppose that Chinese women will be saved from their own oppression by Western solutions. Admittedly, the concerns and problems of women issues differ in different continents or countries, but there is not a dichotomy that justifies the isolation of *similar* efforts conducted in different places.

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Through an examination of relevant themes in the work of Emmanuel Lévinas and in the *Daodejing*《道德经》, this article attempts to articulate a philosophy of the feminine that would provide a horizon in which women's specificities could be considered in their own right and in which equality feminism and feminism of difference could be appreciated in light of a new philosophical orientation.

I. Lévinas's Critics

Lévinas is one of the very few philosophers who have incorporated the feminine into their intellectual endeavor. However, his writings in this connection have been frequently subject to continuous questionings and sharp criticisms. Simone de Beauvoir is celebrated as the first critic of Lévinas. In *Le deuxième sexe*, she initiates groundbreaking accusation of traditional modes of theorization in accordance with which woman is defined in terms of what man lacks. Man represents subject, essence, and the Absolute, while woman cannot enjoy the status of self but is rather nonessential, contingent, and relative. Thus, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being."[1] In this context, Beauvoir cites at length Lévinas's *Le temps et l'autre* (1947) as a typical representation of this long-standing prejudice against women in Western philosophical tradition, in which the feminine is described as "the absolutely contrary contrary (*le contraire absolutement contraire*), whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other."[2]

Beauvoir charges that Lévinas "deliberately takes a man's point of view without referring to (*signaler*) the reciprocity of subject and object" and concludes that his description "is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege."[3] The reasons for her objections are two. One is related to his ascription of the category of the Other to the feminine. For Beauvoir, this practice is in line with the androcentric tradition in which woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man."[4] Woman's otherness is absolute in the sense that her subordination is not the result of a historical event or a social change, but rather "lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts."[5] It is absolute in the sense of a given natural condition that seems to be immutable and beyond the possibility of change. As will be shown in the next section, however, Lévinas's notion of the Other is entirely different from Beauvoir's understanding.

The other reason for Beauvoir's objection has to do with Lévinas's characterization of woman as "mystery." She takes the implication of

this to be that woman is mystery for man. For her, traditional description of femininity as the "mysterious and threatened reality," which is associated with the theory of the eternal feminine, entails the idea that femininity either constitutes an unchangeable Platonic essence or is determined by a special physiological organ, namely, the ovary.[6] However, Lévinas's invocation of "mystery" serves a completely different purpose.

In the year 1949, Lévinas was still a relatively unknown author, and most of his important works were not yet published. Therefore, it is understandable that Beauvoir cited some passages from *Time and the Other* as exemplification of stereotypical description of woman as the other relative to man, without considering their real significance in the context of Lévinas's thought. However, Lévinas remained to be the target of other authors from the 1980s onward. Like Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray ascribes androcentrism to Lévinas.[7]

In French, the word for "lover" has only masculine form, that is, *amant*, while the word for "the beloved" takes feminine form, that is, *aimée*. Irigaray employs the word *l'amante* to indicate the fact that woman is not merely an object of love, but can be a subject of love (*un subjet amoreux*) and an agent of action.[8] For her, the description of woman as the passive beloved has degraded the status of woman. In Lévinas's phenomenology of eros, woman functions as the necessary condition for man's attaining ethical transcendence; nevertheless, she is ultimately ignored and excluded from the genuine ethical relation. While admitting that Lévinas's reflection upon the feminine opens up certain possibilities for further development, Irigaray thinks that these possibilities are unfortunately closed up by himself. Therefore, the figuration of the feminine in his philosophical discourse does not exceed traditional prejudice. Ultimately speaking, Irigaray argues, the feminine plays only a marginal role in Lévinas's philosophy; he does not really include sexual difference into the fundament of his philosophy of the Other.

Irigaray's view has been widely shared by many commentators. In recent years, Stella Sanford raises criticisms from a different angle, yet a criticism no less severe than Beauvoir and Irigaray's. According to her, the relation between philosophical category and empirical content is the criterion for assessing whether Lévinas has made contribution to feminism. However, he has never explicated whether or not these two aspects are related in his philosophy, and if they are, of what nature this connection is. Neither has Lévinas ever considered the question what kind of relation is required of them in order to make a positive contribution to the feminist enterprise.[9] In the view of Sanford, the feminine in Lévinas's corpus is primarily a philosophical category that does not bear upon women in real life; there-

fore, his discourse on the feminine has nothing fruitful to offer to feminism.

Sanford's concern is primarily with feminism as a social-political movement. However, philosophical thematization upon the feminine is not equivalent with a social-political movement with concrete steps and distinctive objectives. The role it can play is to provide appropriate milieu in which feminist movement can be facilitated. It is true that Lévinas's text is highly abstract and speculative, but we cannot therefore deny his concern with feminist issues. In French, the word for woman "la femme" is etymologically related to "le féminin," and Lévinas uses these words interchangeably.

II. The Absolute Alterity of the Feminine

The early Lévinas finds fruitful resource for his thinking on the Other in the role of the feminine as thematized through eros, a fundamental dimension of human existence. One of the earliest figurations of the feminine occurs in *Existence and Existents*. Lévinas writes,

> [T]he plane of *eros* allows us see that the Other *par excellence* is the feminine, through which a world behind the scenes prolongs the world. In Plato, Love [*sic*], a child of need, retains the features of destitution. Its negativity is the simple "less" of need, and not the very movement unto alterity. Eros, when separated from the Platonic interpretation which completely fails to recognize the role of the feminine, can be the theme of a philosophy which, detached from the solitude of light, and consequently from phenomenology properly speaking, will concern us elsewhere.[10]

It is clear that Lévinas's discussion is paralleled by an opposition to Plato's view of eros. In *Symposium*, Plato tells such a story: In the beginning of history, human beings were of one integral body with their lovers. They offended the gods, and gods out of rage split them into half as punishment. From then on, mankind is doomed to roaming around the globe in search of the other half.[11] Therefore, the origin of eros is lack, a lack in constant need that can never be satisfied.

In the view of Lévinas, the Platonic account of eros "completely fails" to take into account the role of the feminine as the Other *par excellence*. Instead, the feminine seems to be considered to be something of a material character that can only temporarily alleviate, but never meet the insatiable need of eros. For Lévinas, this philosophy of love remains within the domain of immanency and does not account for love as "the very movement unto alterity."

As Lévinas states in the Preface to *Existence and Existents*, the study carried out in that book is "a preparatory one" and its aim is to

provide an overview of a number of "broader research topics."[12] It is in the section of "Eros" in the fourth part of *Time and the Other* that Lévinas explicates his thoughts on the feminine at length. For him, the legendary story of searching for the other half embodies the idea that sexual duality consists in two complementary terms, and this duality would disappear when the two terms come into fusion. Against this idea, Lévinas insists that sexual duality is insurmountable, and that a loving relation does not dissolve the alterity of the feminine but rather preserves it.

Lévinas opposes himself not only against Plato's account of eros but also against his own account of the other. According to Plato's law of participation, every term contains a self-sameness and through this sameness contains the other. The other is that which is not the sameness of the term. Therefore, it is the reverse side of the same, and is the negation of the same. Nevertheless, the same and the other are correlated through what defines the same. Lévinas puts forward a novel account of the Other, and this Other is incarnated in the feminine. He attempts to articulate a sense of alterity that is defined neither in terms of negativity and contradiction, nor in terms of conflict and opposition, nor in terms of neutral reciprocity and complementarity, that is, the Other is not to be determined in relation to anything else.

For Lévinas, all these accounts of the other fail to convey the "absolutely contrary contrary" (*le contraire absolutement contraire*)."[13] He spares no efforts in trying to transmit an idea of the Other that is to be described in terms of positivity and essence, that is, the Other is not something that can only be made sense of in relation to another term, no matter what the nature of this relation is: Conflict, opposition, or cooperation, harmony, but rather is something primary and primordial. In the preface to the second edition of *Time and the Other*, Lévinas emphasizes that the feminine is difference *propre*:

> The notion of a transcendent alterity—one that opens time—is at first sought starting with an *alterity-content* (*altérité-contenu*)—that is, starting with femininity. Femininity . . . appeared to me as a difference contrasting strongly with other differences, not merely as a quality different from all others, but as the very quality of difference.[14]

The feminine does not mark a difference among many differences, but is difference itself. In an interview of 1981, Lévinas speaks of the feminine as "the of itself Other, as the origin of the very concept of alterity."[15] The feminine as difference itself is absolute and cannot be incorporated into the sameness of totality.

Presumably, instead of applying his philosophy of the Other to the thematization on the feminine, which is the most of what a favorable reading would grant, a serious reflection upon the feminine has

provided inexhaustible resources for Lévinas's unprecendented challenge against traditional Western philosophy of univocity as founded by Parmenides. In light of the philosophy of univocity, Being (and essence) is one and can only be one. Against this tradition, Lévinas takes sexual difference as the difference *par excellence* that "carves up reality in another sense and conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple."[16] Sexual difference does not collapse but becomes manifest when the two terms are joined together. In this sense, Lévinas speaks of sexual difference as a "formal structure."[17]

Eros is a central touching point in Lévinas's meditation on the feminine. It should be noted that eros for him is not just a means for attaining ethical transcendence. Lévinas writes:

> This idea should make the notion of the couple as distinct as possible from every purely numerical duality. The notion of the sociality of two, which is probably necessary for the exceptional epiphany of the face—abstract and chaste nudity—emerges from sexual differences, and is essential to eroticism and to all instances of alterity—again as quality and not as a simply logical distinction—borne by the "thou shalt not kill" that the very silence of the face says. *Here is a significant ethical radiance within eroticism and the libido*. Through it humanity enters into the society of two and sustains it, authorizes it, perhaps, at least putting into question the simplicity of contemporary paneroticism.[18]

While advocating the sublimity of ethical transcendence, Lévinas attempts to demonstrate that, at what is normally considered to be the most mundane level, that is, libido (i.e., eros), there is already manifest a "significant ethical radiance." Eros is not something that can be "sublated," so to speak, after ethical transcendence is attained. The feminine is not merely an ancilla who helps man enter into genuine ethical relations. One cannot impose, as Irigaray does, such a quasi-Hegelian reading on Lévinas. To the contrary, Lévinas holds that the two of sociality as rooted in the two of sexual difference do not coalesce as one in eros, but become two in the authentic sense. The essence of love is separation in the positive sense of the word. The feminine is not only the necessary condition for achieving ethical transcendence, but the best manifestation of ethical relation.

Lévinas's reflection upon eros is set against Freudian doctrines. According to him, Freud makes eros central to his thoughts, but he fails to provide an apposite and detailed analysis of eros. Freud claims that libido seeks pleasure, but he does not explore the significance of libido in the general structure of existence.[19] In view of this, Lévinas states that his aim is to account for the exceptional role of libido, that is, eros, in showing that even at the most blind and crude level of eros, the proximity of the Other is already at play. He attempts to demon-

strate that sociality is functioning in eros, sociality in the sense of the genuine two, in the sense of the manifestation of genuine ethical relation.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas characterizes the feminine in terms of the Beloved (*Aimée*). He stresses that the epiphany of the Beloved, or the feminine, does not occur in the neuter as defined by the sole gender formal logic. She manifests herself at the limit of being and nonbeing.[20] This characterization of the feminine as the Beloved has to be understood in parallel to Lévinas's insistence that his remarks such as the feminine is the Other, is the mystery, cannot be understood in relation to literally similar Romantic sayings, and that his citations from literary works by writers such as Goethe, Dante, and Bloy only serve the purpose of illustrating the unique and fundamental status of women in the structure of existence, and he does not have any pretension to identify his claim of mystery with facile Romantic imagination.[21] In terms of mystery, Lévinas means something more fundamental. It is related to the irreducible alterity of the feminine that resists the complete knowing of absolute knowledge.[22] Apart from his thematization of the feminine in terms of eros, Lévinas highlights the role of women in social life. Because of limit of space, I cannot engage in a detailed discussion.

III. Three Major Readings of the Feminine in the *Daodejing*

The words that are associated with the feminine in the *Daodejing* are three: *ci* 雌 (versus *xiong* 雄), *pin* 牝 (versus *mu*2 牡), *mu* 母 (versus *fu* 父).[23] *Ci* and *pin* more often refer to animals, but in traditional Chinese poetry, prose, and set phrases, they are also used with regard to women. For a Daoist, the human female is contiguous with the female part of other species because all things (*wanwu* 万物) are one. A Western feminist would not normally think of relating woman to the female part of animals. But in English, the same word "female" is used with reference to both human beings and animals.

Because of the prevalence of the figuration of the feminine, Daoist philosophy has often been characterized as "feminine" in terms of its orientation. The most prominent advocate of this interpretation is the famous historian Joseph Needham. For him, the feminine symbolism in tandem with the water metaphor and other highlights on the soft and weak reflect an emphasis on all that is "tolerant, yielding, permissive, withdrawing, mystical and receptive," and calls for feminine yieldingness in human, social, and political relations.[24] In my view, Needham's delineation of Daoism as feminine has some limitations due to a concern with history, especially when he suggests that primi-

tive Chinese society "was in all probability matriarchal."[25] I shall call his interpretation a "quasi-feminist historical reading."

Roger T. Ames opposes to the characterization of Daoism as "feminine." In his opinion, the references to femininity have to be understood in light of a positive Daoist ideal of the consummate human being who is androgynous. In this human being, "the masculine and feminine gender traits are integrated in some harmonious and balanced relationship."[26] This equilibrium and harmony is achieved by means of reconciliation of the tension between these two opposites. Ames's effort to attribute equal significance to the masculine and the feminine is close to Karyn Lai's attempt to apply her understanding of the Daoist notion of complementarity to the relation between femininity and masculinity. According to her, femininity and masculinity are interdependent, mutually inclusive, and in the meantime remain distinct and are irreducible to each other.[27] I shall call this interpretation a "correlative reading." In my view, one of the major motivations for Ames's objection to Needham's quasi-feminist reading has to do with an inadequate understanding of the essence of a feminist orientation. Ames writes:

> I argue that any emphasis on the "feminine" is entirely compensatory, and that a failure to appreciate this has resulted in a persistent reading to Taoism as passive, quietistic, negative, naturalistic (as opposed to humanistic), escapist, pessimistic, and so on.[28]

This characterization identifies feminist outlook on the world as a retreat from the world, which is based upon an unquestioned assumption of the world as masculine and positive.

Liu Xiaogan's explication of Laozi's verses bearing upon the feminine proceeds primarily from a consideration of how to govern the world.[29] This interpretation is in continuity with the classical Hanfei reading of the *Daodejing*, which maintains that the *ci*-based techniques are invoked for the purpose of accomplishing the *xiong*-inspired end of political control. I shall call this approach a "political reading." Liu insists that the principle of "abiding by the female" is a piece of admonishment to men, who are strong and who are the rulers.[30] It is for the purpose of successfully handling social and political affairs in the world that this principle should be upheld.[31] In light of this "political reading," the objectives and the agents of action are masculine in nature, while feminist virtues are invoked as a strategy for achieving the ultimate goal. When a woman came into power in rare cases, as an agent of action she has become masculine in essence.[32]

Both the "correlative reading" and the "political reading," in my view, presuppose a consensus that endeavor and achievement in the world, which is often masqueraded as "the positive and the neutral,"

is masculine in nature and does not belong to the feminine.[33] On the other hand, Needham's "quasi-feminist historical reading" fails to give sufficient consideration to the significance of the feminine in her own right. This opens possibility for his interpretation to collapse into the other two readings.

IV. The Principle of Abiding by the Female

I shall argue that the feminine occupies a central place in the *Daodejing*. This centrality is not to be defined through a relation to the masculine, either in terms of a harmonious and complementary relation, or in terms of mutual contradiction and dictinctiveness from one another, or in terms of a combination of both facets. Ames describes the combination of these two facets as integration through reconciliation, which in fact serves to downplay the importance of the feminine in the *Daodejing*.[34] While Lai shows alertness regarding a reduction or assimilation of femininity to masculinity, in listing all the imaginable features of the connection between the two as two symmetrical members, she stops short of analyzing the very nature of this irreducibility of the feminine.[35] I shall attempt to bring D. C. Lau's insight regarding the relation of opposites to bear upon the theme of the feminine.

In his article "The Treatment of Opposites in *Lao Tzu*," D. C. Lau raises objections to the usual interpretation concerning the relation between two parties of a pair of opposites.[36] The typical opposite terms he gives as examples are short (*duan* 短) and long (*chang* 長), soft (*rou* 柔) and hard (*gang* 剛), weak (*ruo* 弱) and strong (*qiang* 強), and he calls the first words in each pair the "lower" terms, and the second words the "higher" terms.[37] I shall use both terms in the following for the sake of facility of our discussion. Lau's thesis is set forth in opposition to what I call a "quasi-Hegelian dialectical reading" of the *Daodejing*. Scholars such as Feng Youlan, Yang Kuan, Yang Rongguo, and Hu Shi have described the movements between two opposite terms as a circular process, in which each term transforms into its opposite by reversion, conquering, or generation. According to Lau, these scholars have mistakenly assimilated apparently similar passages from the *Laozi* to those in the *Yijing*《易經》.[38] In fact, there are importance differences between these two scriptures. In the *Yijing*, there are often a pair of terms that signify movement in opposite directions. Taken together, these two kinds of movement form a cycle and so suggest a processs of circular change. Yet what can be ascribed to Laozi is not more than this:

> [W]hen a thing develops to the higher limit, it will *necessarily* reverse and begin to decline, *but it is not stated* that when a thing is at, or reaches, the lower limit, it will *necessarily* develop all the way to the higher limit.[39]

What is necessary is only one specific movement called return (*fu* 復) or reversion (*fan* 返), which is from the higher limit to the lower limit. On the other hand, there is not a *telos* engrained in the lower terms that would necessitate a movment toward the higher terms. Therefore, there is not a process of circular change between the lower and higher terms. The formulation of Lau's thesis is not focused upon the opposite of *ci* and *xiong*. However, his insight applies very well, perhaps the best, to the opposites of *ci* and *xiong*, *pin* and *mu2*. As a matter of fact, the primordiality of the feminine for Lau seems to be a most obvious idea embodied in the *Daodejing*. In citing from "know the male, abide by the female" of chapter 28, he describes "valuing the soft" and "abiding by the soft" as the "best authenticated theory" that can be attributed to Laozi. In order to support this view, he cites from comments in the *Zhuangzi*《庄子》, the *Xunzi*《荀子》, and *Lüshi Chunqiu*《吕氏春秋》, which unanimously state that Laozi values the soft.[40] Lau uses this very principle to serve vindication for his thesis concerning the noncircular nature of the movements between opposite terms. He argues:

> If all things undergo a perpetual course of circular change, from the lower to the higher and from the higher to the lower, the injunction "abide by the soft" becomes idle advice. . . . Indeed it will be impossible to abide by anything, for everything will inexorably change to its opposite. In other words in a world of ceaseless change, one cannot stop but has to move with the stream, and in such a world it will be futile to give advice as to what one should abide by.[41]

In light of Lau's explication, it becomes easier for us to appreciate Laozi's accentuation upon the lower terms.[42]

Another significant point Lau makes bears upon the statement that the soft and weak overcomes the hard and strong.[43] In accordance with the idea of circular process, the soft would become the strong when it overcomes the latter. Lau argues that the lower and higher terms are not two sides internal to a unity, which refer to whatever side that is at an advantegeous or disadvantegeous position. This is because, if this should be the case, then there is not a *definite* soft side that we can abide by. For Lau, the conflict between the lower and higher is "an external conflict between one thing which is weak and another thing which is strong."[44] The opposite terms in the *Daodejing* are not two sides internal to a thing within its own unity, but are externally recognizable and determinable. A correlative reading of the figuration of the feminine has the danger of taking femininity and

masculinity as two sides within a unity and thus neutralizes and obscures the thrust of Laozi's verses concerning the central importance of the feminine. The feminine bears upon women in the empirical sense but is not restricted to that. With respect to *dao*, it could be said that *dao* is feminine in nature instead of an unsexed origin that comprehends the feminine and masculine.[45]

Furthermore, Lau points out that the victory of the soft over the hard is not one in the ordinary sense, but is true victory. This is because the soft always remains to be preserved by means of noncontention (*buzheng* 不爭) (and letting-it-be [*wuwei* 無為]) and is not visited by defeat in turn, while the victor in the ordinary sense will surely meet his/her match one day and be defeated.[46] A good textual support for Lau's point, I think, can be found in chapter 43: "The softest thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world. . . . That is why I know the benefit of letting-it-be." Laozi does not state that abiding by the soft is ultimately at the service of the hard, or of becoming the hard. Therefore, the principle of abiding by the soft/female is not set forth as a means to end of the hard/male. In this light, the political reading of the feminine misses Laozi's point to a large extent.

V. *Ci* 雌, *Pin* 牝, *Mu* 母, and *Yin* 阴 in the *Daodejing*

In the following I take a look at the occurrences of *ci*, *pin*, *mu*, and *yin* in the *Daodejing*. *Ci* appears twice in chapter 10 and 28, respectively: "When the gates of heaven open and shut, are you capable of keeping to the role of the female (*ci*)?"; "know the male, keep to the role of the female (*ci*), and be a ravine to the empire". *Pin* appears four times in chapters 6, 55, and 61: "The spirit of the valley never dies. This is called the mysterious female (*pin*). The gateway of the mysterious female, is called the root of heaven and earth"; "One who has an abundance of virture (*de* 德) is like a newborn child: . . . It has not known the union of woman (*pin*) and man (*mu2* 牡), but its organs get aroused"; "In the union of the world, the female (*pin*) always gets the better of the male (*mu2*) by stillness".[47] It can be seen that, in all the verses where *ci* and *pin* appear (except the one from chapter 55), there is a clear stress on the role of the female. In chapter 10, *ci* appears without *xiong*. Since the phrasing in this chapter is almost the same as that in chapter 28, the verses in the latter chapter make perfect sense without any reference to *xiong*.

The occurrence of the word *mu* 母 has the highest number. It occurs seven times in five chapters, and never together with what is assumed to be its opposite, the word *fu* 父: "The nameless was the beginning of

heaven and earth; The named was the mother of the ten thousand things"; "I alone am different from others, and value being fed by the mother"; "There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth. Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change, goes round and does not weary. It is capable of being the mother of the world." "The world had a beginning, and this beginning could be the mother of the world";[48] "When he possesses the mother of a state, he can then endure."[49] In addition, in "The Great One Gives Birth to the Waters" (*Taiyi Shengshui* 太一生水) of *Laozi* of the Guodian 郭店 edition, the word *mu* occurs once: "completing a cycle, the Great One starts over again, making herself the mother of the ten thousand things."[50] The frequency of the occurrence of *mu* is amazing and impressive compared with the fact that the word *fu* appears only once in chapter 42: "I shall take this as my precept (*jiaofu* 教父)."[51]

The word *yin* 阴 (versus *yang* 阳) has often been associated with the feminine in some other contexts. It occurs only once in chapter 42 of the *Daodejing*: "The myriad things shoulder the *yin* and embrace the *yang*, and blending this *qi* 氣, they attain harmony." Ames cites this passage as a key support for his "correlative reading."[52] It is true that an idea of complementarity of *yin* and *yang* seems to be embodied here, and this verse lends to the political reading as well. However, even Liu, the strongest advocate for the political reading, explicates that Laozi does not use *yinyang* to refer to women and men. This is because these words are more closely related to natural phenomena and thus are too abstract and general to be assocated with human affairs.[53] What is to be noted is that *yin* and *yang* appear five times in "The Great One Gives Birth to the Waters." It is stated that the spiritual and numinous, in assisting each another, produces *yin* and *yang*; and in repeatedly assisting each other, *yin* and *yang* produce the four seasons. It is also stated that the eternal movement of the Great One (*Taiyi* 太一), who makes herself the mother of ten thousand things, is not something that *yin* and *yang* can bring to closure.[54] It is clear that, compared with all other words bearing upon the feminine, *yin has the remotest association with the feminine in the particular text of the Daodejing*, and the idea of complementarity embodied in chapter 42 is a different thing from the principle of abiding by the female.

As stated in the foregoing, *mu* is the only word that never occurs in relation to her opposite. Incontrovertibly, this attests to the primacy Laozi attributes to the feminine. Scholars such as Ames try to downplay the importance of the figure of mother by describing her as an "impregnated woman," which means "a union of the masculine and the feminine."[55] There are two objections to this reduction. First, that a woman is in pregnancy does not detract from her femininity at all.

The capacity and actuality of motherhood is not what alone warrants a woman to be referrred as mother. Relating a pregnant woman to the masculine risks reducing women to a means of producing progeny, the son (who is masculine). Presumably, it is not only because of the capacity of pregnancy that Laozi accentuates the femimine. Second, among all the chapters where *mu* occurs, there is only one place in chapter 20 where she is actually a feeding mother. On all the other occasions, *mu* is referred to as the origin, source, and guardian of the ten thousand things, which appears to be a metaphorical invocation. However, this can in no way weaken the centrality of *mu*, which is consonant with the principle of abiding by the female.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Hopefully, we can now revisit the questions raised in the Introduction. Our answer is: First, there should be no worry that writings focusing on women's specificities, which genre of writing belongs to feminist philosophy, again set up a dichotomy between woman and man, as long as these writings do not proceed from man's perspective and interests, but attempt to present women as they are. Elaborating on women's specific characteristics would be immune from the charge of essentialism, provided that this elaboration is not governed by stereotypical modes of thinking and does not take itself as absolute, provided that this elaboration does not aim at endorsing women's confinement to specific social roles traditionally considered to be in harmony with those specificities. Were these basic provisos not taken care of, feminist philosophy would lose its point.

Second, the claims to women's equal rights, which belong to feminism as a social-political movement, are of a negative nature in the main in that these claims are primarily concerned with those rights denied to women on the sole basis of their sex. There has been significant improvement of women's status in the West; however, in most developing countries, women's situation remains to be deplorable. There is not a solid basis for a worry about so-called gynocentrism, since demands are made only for those things that have been unfairly rendered inaccessible to women.

Compared with the negative nature of feminism, and with the tendency toward neutrality of intellectualism of feminist philosophy, philosophy of the feminine takes one step further. It attempts to articulate the characteristics and role of women in a positive sense. From Lévinas, we learn to consider women's specificities in their proper otherness and to dispose the immanence of masculine–feminine duality, either in terms of their opposition, conflict, and or in

terms of their mutual dependence, reciprocity, and harmony. Resorting to the principle of abiding by the female in the *Daodejing*, this philosohy attempts to reorient our conception of the world and of the ways in which we pursue our goals in it. Its goal is not a simplistic reversal of woman and man's status. Rather, it aims to cultivate a horizon of thinking that no longer takes hierarchy and contention as central. When such a horizon is opened, the quarrel between what is sometimes called feminism of difference and equality feminism will be shown to be unnecessary, since women's specificities are not to be used to justify their restriction to specific social roles, and the efforts of the latter does not entail that women should become an honorary male. In such a way, both genres of feminism may come to realize more clearly what they share.

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Endnotes

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1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 15.
2. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 88; *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 81.
3. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 15, n. 1.
4. Ibid., 15.
5. Ibid., 18.
6. Ibid., 11.
7. Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Lévinas: On the Divinity of Love," in *Re-reading Lévinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, trans. Margaret Whitford (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 109–18.
8. Ibid., 115.
9. Stella Sanford, *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Lévinas* (London and New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, 2000), 137–38.
10. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 85. In this article, I capitalize Lévinas's word "Other" when it is used as a philosophical terminology.
11. Plato, *Symposium*, 193a–b.
12. Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, 27.
13. Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 85/77.
14. Ibid., 36/14, emphasis original.
15. Emmanuel Lévinas, "Love and Filiation," in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 66.
16. Ibid., 85/78.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 36/14, emphasis added.
19. Ibid., 89–90/83.

20. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, quatrième édition (The Hague/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 233.
21. Cf. Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, 86/78–79.
22. Cf. Lévinas, "Love and Filiation," 66.
23. Since the Chinese Pinyin spellings of 牡 and 母 are the same, I shall use *mu2* for 牡. I shall discuss *yin* 阴 in the next section.
24. Cf. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 59.
25. Ibid., 33.
26. Roger T. Ames, "Taoism and the Androgynous Ideal," in *Women in China*, ed. Rochard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen (Youngstown: Philo Press, 1981), 21–45, at 43.
27. Karyn Lai, "The *Daodejing*: Resources for Contemporary Feminist Thinking," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (2000): 146–47.
28. Ames, "Taoism and the Androgynous Ideal," 23. This characterization is retained in David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics," in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gernder*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2000), 86. I shall sometimes cite from the text of 2000 as the updated formulation of Ames's position.
29. Liu Xiaogan, Laozi Gujin: Wuzhong Duikan Yu Ziping Yinlun 老子古今: 五种对勘与析评引论 (*The Laozi from Ancient Times to Today: A Collation of Five Versions and Commentary*) (in Chinese) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Press, 2006), 140–41. In an earlier contribution Liu stresses that the references to femininity in the *Daodejing* have nothing to do with women in real life and therefore cannot make immediate contribution to feminism. This criticism bears similarity to Sanford's comment that Lévinas's notion of feminine is solely a philosophical category. Nevertheless, Liu does not draw such a bold and frank conclusion that the *Daodejing* cannot offer any intellectual resource for feminism. See Liu Xiaogan, "The Question of Interpreting the Metaphors Concerning the Feminine in the *Daodejing*," *Academia Sinica Journal for the Study of Literature and Philosophy* 23 (2003): 179–209.
30. This phrase is from chapter 28 of the *Daodejing*. The whole verse is: I know the male, abide by the female (zhi qi X, shou qi ci 知其雄, 守其雌).
31. Liu, *The Laozi from Ancient Times to Today*, 318.
32. Ibid., 717.
33. Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, 27.
34. Hall and Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics," 86–87.
35. Lai, "The *Daodejing*," 145–47.
36. D. C. Lau, "The Treatment of Opposites in *Lao Tzu*," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 21, no. 2 (1958): 344–60.
37. Ibid., 344.
38. Ibid., 351.
39. Ibid., 353, emphasis original.
40. Ibid., 349.
41. Ibid., 349–50.
42. Certainly, Lau's thesis is not widely known, and specialists in Daoist philosophy may find this idea quite objectionable. I was only using Lau's thesis for a specific purpose of this article, and do not claim his interpretation to be the only correct one.
43. Cf. chapters 36, 43, and 78 of the *Daodejing*.
44. Lau, "The Treatment of Opposites in *Lao Tzu*", 350.
45. See next section on *taiyi* 太一 being something that *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳 cannot bring to closure.
46. Ibid., 356.
47. I cite, with occasional modifications, from D. C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1963), except for chapter 55, for which I cite from Michael Lafargue, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching: A Translation and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). I have restored the order of woman and man according to the original in chapter 55 (*pin mu2* 牝牡) instead of following most translations that take the order of man and woman.

48. The word *mu* occurs twice more after this verse.
49. The chapter references are 1, 20, 25, 52, and 59, respectively. In the most recently excavated Guodian 郭店 edition of the *Daodejing*, the references to *mu* in chapters 25 and 59 remain, while all the other words related to the feminine are missing.
50. Cf. Robert G. Henricks, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 123, 125.
51. In the Mawangdui version, the character 甫 (*fu*) is written as 父 in chapter 21.
52. Hall and Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics," 87. I cite their translation of this verse.
53. Liu, *The Laozi from Ancient Times to Today*, 587.
54. Henricks, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching*, 123–24.
55. Hall and Ames, "Sexism, with Chinese Characteristics," 87.